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CANDOR IN THE PULPIT.

A SERMON

PREACHED AT THE SOUTH CONGREGATIONAL CHURCH,
BOSTON,

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BY

EDWARD E. HALE.

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CANDOR IN THE PULPIT.

"The truth shall make you free."—JOHN viii., 32.

It is one of the greater benefits derived from a journey or a visit, that we are so glad, when it is ended, to return home. There is the same benefit in the closing of the church for a few weeks: we come back with all the memories of past years to quicken our hopes of years to come; and in a thousand associations with other years, there comes in a special pleasure for this first day at home. I know very well that some of you are strangers here, and do not feel this at all; and I cannot ask that those who are not strangers should feel it as I do, for my whole life and my whole duty centres here, and yours does not. But I may believe that for almost all of us, absence for a few weeks makes the house of our worship all the more homelike and glad.

I will try not to run counter to this line of pleasant feeling in saying something to-day which may seem a little personal, about what you may expect of me, and what you have a right to expect of me, in the services which bring us together here. But I do not mean to speak in the least of myself personally, excepting in one point, and you will see why I do so there. I do want to speak of my special profession, of this business of preaching, because just now there has been more or less public discussion about its responsibilities, and I have not seen that we have had a fair representation yet in that discussion,—we ministers, whose duty it is to preach as well as we can, and from these pulpits to announce the best we know. It seems to me but reasonable—before I begin on another series of fifty sermons, which I want you to come to hear—for me to say, squarely, how much I want to do in such preaching, and to acknowledge, with equal frankness, what are the limitations on me in the nature of things; that is, to say what I do not expect to do. This I am going to try to say, because it seems to me that in

some recent public discussions both our responsibilities and our limitations have been unfairly stated.

Some years since, a New York politician of repute was discussing our system of public affairs with a friend of mine, and among other things they spoke of the place and power of the pulpit. The New Yorker said boldly that the ministers must not be permitted to keep up their talk about higher law, nor in any way to express opinions on matters which might come into a political canvass. My friend, who was used to the New England habits, said if he went to church at all he liked to have a man say what he thought was true, whether he agreed with it himself or not.

"I do not know that," said the other. And this remark I wish to comment on particularly: "These preachers," he said, "make us assent quietly to a great many things which no man of sense believes; and, in return, we have a right to tell them to be quiet with regard to certain matters which we understand better than they can."

There was the frank statement of a man used to compromise and convenience in public affairs, used to what is familiarly called log-rolling. "If I stand by you, you must stand by me." That is its demand. I am afraid that, in all its brutal frankness, his remark expresses only too well an underlying suspicion which exists in many minds, that the clergy or the pulpit have certain secrets which they do not disclose, certain reticences which they are obliged to keep, and that they pretend to believe certain things in which they have no confidence. This man had some reason for saying that the clergy to whom he was accustomed asked him to assent quietly to certain things which no man of sense believed. To take, for the moment, certain extreme cases,—and I will speak by-and-by of cases which are not extreme,—there is certainly not one man of sense in a hundred who believes that at the call of Joshua the sun and moon literally stood still for hours over Gibeon and Ajalon. Yet I hazard nothing in saying that the preachers who controlled the religion of Central New York, where that man lived, would not in ten years' time permit a suspicion to be expressed in their pulpits that the statement in the book of Joshua is not literally true. When people go to church in such a region and listen to these preachers, they are conscious all the time of such buried embers, which must be trodden over very gently. They sit and listen to sermons which they do not really assent

to, certain that behind there is a great deal which they do not assent to,— which must not be spoken about by anybody. The absolute and eternal damnation of ninety-nine hundredths of the human race is such a hidden coal of fire. This man of whom I speak probably did not believe it; probably none of the men of intelligence around him believed it; probably the minister whom he heard on Sunday did not believe it. But, because the doctrine is all wrought in with the whole system of the church establishment to which they belonged, and because they all believed that it was best to maintain some system of united worship and of church life, they dreaded to pull out this particular offending tenet, and all tacitly agreed to let it pass with as little allusion to it as might be possible.

So large is the mass of these hidden unbeliefs, that it has lately been squarely charged on the clergy, in quarters which give great weight to such a charge, that they are consciously keeping back what they know; and this is said by way of accounting for the indifference with which people hear them. It is said that perhaps if they suppress so much which is true, they may express what is false; or, if the case be not quite so bad as this, it is said that people have not absolute confidence in the sincerity of the pulpit. It is said that people think we are keeping up a form, and that what we say is of no great account, because what we do not say— what we are afraid to say—is a mass of hidden truth important and formidable.

I heard a minister of another communion from ours express it in this way:—

“I think,” said he, “that if Tyndall or Huxley lectured in the Music Hall on one of our subjects,— say on education, or on the relief of the poor, which every one would say were our subjects,—I think that the audience of three thousand people there would believe that Tyndall or Huxley were telling the very best he knew, and telling it precisely as well as he could. I think the audience would believe in his sincerity. But if one of us ministers were to speak in the Music Hall on one of their subjects,—on evolution, or the law of natural selection, or the creation of the world,—I do not think that all that audience would trust us in the same way. I think many persons would doubt our sincerity, because we are clergymen. For we are constantly stating as truths so many things which we cannot prove, that

I think many persons have lost their confidence in our sincerity, and consider us as people who, in the interests of a cause, overstate, understate, or are in some other way indifferent to accuracy."

Now, when I heard this estimate, passed by an experienced minister on his own profession, I felt as if my hair grew gray as he spoke. I could hardly believe my ears. If I thought my hearers supposed me to be such a rhetorician as he described, so indifferent to accuracy, so insincere, I would never stand in any pulpit again. What comfort is there in speaking, what pleasure, what use, if, while you speak, you know that people do not believe half you say? You are worse off than an actor is; for he, for the moment, carries his hearer with him, and though the people do not believe he is Shylock or Hamlet, they do believe the sentiment which he utters from Shylock's mouth or Hamlet's. It is about six months since I heard this confession made by a preacher. I do not know that any statement regarding my profession has ever affected me so sadly. At once I made it subject of thought and inquiry. I wanted to know whether it fairly describes the estimate which men have of us, which people in general have about preachers, or which you have about me.

Well, I am not fully prepared to answer all of those questions to-day. But I am sorry to say that I fear that this gentleman's suspicions are partly true. I think the opinion of the New York politician whom I cited goes a good way among men of the pews,—men of the world, as perhaps they would call themselves. I must speak of separate cases, though I do not want to be invidious. Wherever a church chooses to anchor itself to an old creed, it is necessarily in great danger. Here are our friends of the American Episcopal Church. All their tendencies are to breadth. They do not want to be narrow. If they have any central wish, it is to be the national church, embracing all the Christians of the land. But, unhappily for them, they have anchored themselves to three or four creeds which are by no means consistent with each other. There is the Apostles' Creed which says one thing, and the Nicene Creed which says more things, and their brethren in England add the Athanasian Creed which says more; and some of them think that it would be best for them to believe all that the English Church believes. Then there are the Thirty-nine Articles of

religion, which say many more things. In practice, any man may join the Episcopal Church and receive its sacraments, who, in any fashion, believes the Apostles' Creed. They would receive me, not as a preacher but as a layman, without any objection. But, all the same, the Prayer-book contains the Nicene Creed and the Thirty-nine Articles,—or, if it be an English Prayer-book, the Athanasian Creed beside. And there is no doubt that the impression is,—and the fair impression, too,—that these creeds, or certainly the first three I named, contain the doctrine of the Episcopal Church as the clergy receive it. There are some dioceses where the bishop would not ordain a minister unless he believed from his heart the Apostles' Creed, the Nicene Creed, and the Thirty-nine Articles.

Now, in every Episcopal Church this Prayer-book is in every pew. The thoughtful layman opens on the Thirty-nine Articles. He reads, for instance, that Christ, after rising from the dead, took with him into heaven “his flesh, bones, and all things pertaining to the perfection of man's nature, and there sitteth until he return to judge all men the last day.”

He does not believe this ; he knows he does not believe it. He does not believe that the flesh, bones, and body which Jesus Christ wore in Galilee are in any place outside this world. But he thinks the man in a surplice, in the pulpit opposite, has said he does believe it. What follows is, that he thinks the minister careless and inaccurate in his expression of his opinions ; or, he considers him a hypocrite, professing for comfort's sake an opinion that he does not entertain at all. It has been said by a witty man that there is not one man of sense in the nineteenth century who really believes one of the Thirty-nine Articles. It is certain that if, by good luck, they could be blotted out of being to-night, if a synod of the Episcopal Church met to-morrow to state articles of belief, they would not repeat one of those articles in the form in which it stands. It is certain that they are bound into the Prayer-book as a bit of history, and because it is hard to get them out. But, all the same, it is certain that the mass of men—the rank and file who know anything about them—believe that the clergy of that church have expressed a belief in them. This is not quite true. What is true is, that the clergy of that church have not expressed their disbelief in them. While they do not, while they let such a bit of old times and forgotten opinion lie,

they undoubtedly get the reputation among practical people of pretending to believe something they do not believe. They suffer, therefore, from that reputation of insincerity of which I am inquiring.

Now I do not select the Episcopal Church as more in danger than other churches with written creeds. I select it because it is, on the whole, the broadest of all churches which are so unfortunate. The suspicion which falls on their clergy falls on the Roman Catholic priest when he says the wafer is God. The layman does not believe it, and he is apt to think that in his heart the priest does not believe it. When the layman in one of our Orthodox Congregational churches hears the old-fashioned creed of his church read, knowing that he would never have chosen that language to express his own convictions,—wondering that the minister believes what he does not believe,—he is in danger of suspecting the minister's sincerity. Even our friends the Methodists,—who are very broad, who want to be broad,—in New England, are not afraid of the name latitudinarian,—are trammelled by the same tangle. Twenty years ago I said to one of the wisest and best of them, that they also had one creed for the pulpit and another for the pews. He said it was not so. He said I could be received to their ordination without assent to the articles, if I would only say I loved Christ,—as I gladly could say, in the sense he meant. But he said I should have to say that I did not mean to break up the organization. And I could not make him see the hollowness of a system which puts in print certain articles of religion, supposing it well to keep them before the world, when at heart the men who are to carry out that system do not believe those articles at the bottom of their souls.

That I do not state the danger with any unfairness, let me read you words from an authority every one will own to be competent. I could not make the statement with more severity. Here is what Mr. Phillips Brooks said in a recent address, which has been printed in the *Princeton Review*. He is speaking at a school of theology:—

“And first of all, as the most needed,” he says, “and I am tempted to say as the most rare, of the qualities that such a man must have, I cannot hesitate to speak of candor. The scepticism which I have been trying to describe evidently must be a very pervading thing. It evidently cannot be shut up in any pervading class or classes. Life plays upon faith everywhere. Ideas change and develop in all

sorts and conditions of men. And the occupants of pulpits, the preachers, have their doubts and disbeliefs as well as others. The first step, I believe, towards a clear relationship between the preacher and the people ought to be a perfectly frank understanding of this fact. There ought to be not the least concealment or disguise about it. Men ought never to have the slightest reason to suppose that the preacher is asking them to believe what he does not believe himself, or warning them that it is dangerous to doubt what to his own mind seems very questionable. But how is it now? A large acquaintance with clerical life has led me to think that almost any company of clergymen, gathering together and talking freely to each other, will express opinions which would greatly surprise and at the same time greatly relieve the congregations who ordinarily listen to those ministers. Now just see what that means. It means that in these days when faith is hard we are deliberately making it harder, and are making ourselves liable to the Master's terrible rebuke of the Scribes and Pharisees of old: 'They bind heavy burdens, and grievous to be borne, and lay them on men's shoulders, but they themselves will not move them with one of their fingers.' Is not this true? How many men in the ministry to-day believe in the doctrine of verbal inspiration which our fathers held, and how many of us have frankly told the people that we do not believe it, and so lifted off their Bible's page the heavy cloud of difficulties and inconsistencies which that doctrine laid there?"

... "Not much more than a year ago, I heard one of our most venerable preachers deliberately tell a congregation that no man was a Christian who did not believe that this world was made in six literal days. He had a perfect right to say so if he thought so, as no doubt he did. But for those of us whom any such test of Christianity would totally exclude from any claim to Christian character, to let such statements pass without most clear and earnest disavowals is certainly a grievous wrong to faith, and makes the scepticism against which it tries to guard.

"There must be no lines of orthodoxy inside the lines of truth. Men find that you are playing with them, and will not believe you even when you come in earnest. I know what may be said in answer. I know the old talk about holding the outworks as long as we can, and then retreating to the citadel; and perhaps there has hardly been a more mischievous metaphor than this. It is the mere illustration

of a metaphor. The minister who tries to make people believe that which he questions, in order to keep them from questioning that which he believes, knows very little about the certain workings of the human heart, and has no real faith in truth itself."

Now, at the beginning of another year's preaching, I cite these statements from different people, and I point out these dangers of the creed-bound churches, simply because I want to say, that these gentlemen must speak for their own churches and communions, and not for those of us who are not fettered by unchanging creeds. When it is said that a minister is not candid, let us know what church says that, and of what ministers it is said. This statement of Mr. Brooks has been widely cited. The president of the university cited it,—speaking immediately after Mr. Brooks, and when I was to follow him immediately. He cited it to show why young men would not come into the pulpit,—because they thought the pulpit was insincere. And certainly, if the pulpit is going to accept the charge of want of candor or of insincerity, the sooner honest men learn it, and the more sternly honest men keep out of it, the better for them and for the world.

Now you have seen how squarely Mr. Brooks protests against any such want of candor. But Mr. Brooks feels the danger, and confesses it, of lines of orthodoxy inside lines of truth.

Our position in the liberal pulpit is more fortunate. With our eyes open, knowing the difficulties of our position, we and our fathers in these liberal churches determined not to have any lines of orthodoxy. We have our views as to truth, but, with our eyes open, we determined that every man must state his own creed, and that no one must be called on to accept any he had not stated. In this course, there are great inconveniences. The world is not yet used to it, and handles us very unfairly. If a man who calls himself a Unitarian in Nebraska says he ought to have five wives at a time, there are plenty of people to say that the Unitarians believe everybody ought to have five wives. Every one of us is constantly taken to task for absurdities committed in the Unitarian name. But as I said, with our eyes open to the inconveniences,—if you please, to the disadvantages,—of our position, we assumed that position. We state no creed,—

not about God, Christ, Bible, Heaven, or Hell; not about the things people most agree upon: because we know the danger of having "lines of orthodoxy inside the lines of truth." Let every man state his own.

Taking these disadvantages, we are entitled, any fair man would say, to the advantages of this position. It is not fair to hold any Unitarian preacher responsible for the absurdities, or the lack of faith, or the lack of candor, of the communions which have chosen to write down their beliefs, and are trying to cling to those lines, however strongly the tide of opinion and of life may sweep them away. Our skirts are clear. This pulpit never said that this world was made in six literal days. This pulpit never said that the sun stood still upon Gibeon, nor the moon in the valley of Ajalon. This pulpit never said we must hold the outworks of belief as long as we can, before we retreat to the citadel. Not in my day, nor in my predecessor's day, nor in his venerable predecessor's, was any such homage paid here, either to decorum or to tradition. The people who founded this church wrenched the ties which bound them to such decorous observances, though it cost them tears of blood. Those who followed them have taken frankly all the inconveniences, all the opprobriums, of freedom. And they are entitled, in return, at least to the credit of sincerity and candor.

I have myself supposed that the danger of our pulpit was on the other side. There is an affectation of candor, as there may be an affectation of justice and an affectation of mercy. It is as absurd as any affectation. I have thought the Unitarian pulpit was in danger of that affectation. I have heard a Unitarian preacher say in prayer, "We bring thee our best thoughts of to-day, and our best hopes and faith. If to-morrow we reject them, we will be first to disown them before thy throne." I think this is carrying sincerity into affectation. I think no man speaks so to the friend whom he trusts, or the woman whom he loves. No man feels bound by candor or sincerity to say, "I am very fond of you to-day, and if to-morrow I see anybody I like better, I will be first to tell you so." It is of this affectation of sincerity that I have thought we were in more danger than of the lack of candor.

I have thought, again, that we were in danger of passing into absurd rashness in our courage or independence. One of our preachers took occasion to say that we ought to place in the pulpit the Bhagavat-Gita, the collection of the wis-

dom of India, instead of this antiquated Hebrew Bible. Freeman Clarke replied, "Will you have it in Sanscrit or in English?" "Oh, I would read from the English, of course," said the young reformer. "And how will you do that," said his wiser friend, "seeing it has never been translated?" A few passages, versions made through the French, were, in fact, all that were at that time in the English tongue. And the brave reformer, too ignorant to know that the book did not exist in English, was yet bold enough to urge that it should be used as a substitute for the Bible. That sort of audacity, sublime in its intent, preposterous in the detail, is one of the dangers that we have brought on ourselves by assuming the liberal position. If we accept the dangers of such audacity, we ought to be free from the disgraces of supposed concealment or want of candor.

I certainly hope that friends of mine of twenty years' standing here, know that, for one, I have nothing to conceal in the pulpit. What I know I will tell; what I believe I will say. I will not often trouble you by telling what I do not know,—that would take long indeed. And I will grant, as you have heard me say a thousand times, that I know no prayer so sublime, or which so well expresses our position here before God, as the prayer of the poor man in Galilee: "Lord, I believe; help thou mine unbelief." But I do not choose to leave the imputation of want of candor or insincerity on the issue of any personal feeling you may have about me. I am anxious to say, as publicly as I can, in reference to what Mr. Brooks has said, that I also have a large acquaintance with clerical life. I have frequent opportunities of hearing ministers in private communion,—the most private. As such communion has been alluded to, I am bound to bear testimony to the simple piety, the dependence upon God, of the clergymen whom I have known most prominent in affairs and best known before the world. I think that congregations, and the larger world which does not affect church-going, would be surprised and would be comforted, if, with propriety, they could hear, see, and feel the simplicity and tenderness of the religious faith of the men whom the public regard as the intellectual or logical or ecclesiastical leaders of the religious institutions of the country. And as for secrets in theology not made known to the world, I am bound to say that so far as we are concerned there are no such hidden mysteries. There are wide differences of opinion among our clergy,

undoubtedly. But a free pulpit gives every man a chance, and, as I have said, offers a temptation for a complete exposure of them. Even if a man *were* a coward, he has no motive in our time for concealment.

Two years ago, for instance, at the movement of some of our most radical and most conservative men, an arrangement was made for an Institute, on the plan of the Social Science meetings, or those of the Scientific Association. It was a meeting of ministers, without lay delegates, at Springfield; arranged that men might tell the last thing they had learned in American freethinking, in German criticism, in Eastern research. I know it was proposed that the meetings should be private; but so soon as it was found that the Springfield people wanted to listen, the doors were thrown open. But the same papers were read then which were prepared for the clergy only. The lowest depth of research was sounded, and the soundings were exposed to anybody who wanted to look on. The second session of this Institute, as it is called, will be held next month in Providence.

Or let me take an illustration from the other side. I have the honor to belong to a philosophical club of which one-quarter of the members are clergymen. The others are artists, authors, merchants, or manufacturers. The subjects discussed range through the whole circle of speculation, from the theory of laws of prohibition round to the origin of the idea of beauty. I am bound to say that, so far as I can see, the seven or eight clergymen in that club are, on the whole, the audacious speculators. They have, on the whole, read the most, and, on the whole, they are the least anxious about consequences. They believe that the truth will take care of itself, and, on the whole, are least distressed about guards and barriers for its preservation.

This is to be said in conclusion, however, and I wish I could so say it that it could be remembered:—

People judge the pulpit, judge the minister, by what he says on one occasion,—or what they think he says. That is very unfair. A sermon is a mere bit in a great mosaic. It has a beginning, middle, and end, but it belongs to a long series of instructions,—a series which covers many years. It is very unfair to expect a man to put into one sermon all he knows, all he believes, all he does not know, and all he does not believe. I have probably said in this pulpit five hundred times in twenty-two years, that I suppose what we

call the Gospels are broken fragments of memoirs collected at different times, between the thirtieth and sixtieth years after the Saviour's death ; that it is a great pity there are not more ; and that it is very hard to reconstruct the history from such fragments. It is very hard to be expected, by an occasional church-goer, to say that, every Sunday before I read from the gospel,—hard not only on me, but on those who come to church more frequently than he. And here is only one instance in a thousand, where we have a right to claim, that what we say and what we do not say in any sermon shall be judged not by that sermon only, but with fair reference to what we have said before.

Judge us, dear friends, as you would be judged. I do not speak of myself only, but of all who try to tell God's truth in the pulpit. "Who is sufficient for these things?" Paul asks, eagerly. Of course nobody is sufficient for them. Nobody but a fool ever thought he was sufficient. But we are sufficient to do the work in part. We can tell the best we know. We can report the message we have heard. We can study a little, and tell you what we have learned. We can talk with the saints on earth, and do our best to interpret what they tell us. Trust us so far. And we,—we will promise to tell no lies. Whatever the trumpet sounds,—faint if you please, unmusical if you please,—it shall not be uncertain.

The truth shall make us free, and freedom will compel the truth. We may all rest on these certainties: God is true and we are his children. We really know the tone of his voice. We know when a true child of his tells what he believes. This divine instinct is our birthright because we are God's children. No rhetoric will deceive us ; no ingenious logic will do more than confuse us : no authority will alarm us. Listen as the true children of a true God, speak as the true children of a true God, and he the Spirit of Truth will come, and into all truth he will guide you !

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